

Amy Ross

January 9, 2015



Helping kids soar high

The Materials Science and Technology Division's Amy Ross is a volunteer pilot and coordinator for the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles Program, which introduces kids ages 8 to 17 to the joy of flying during free flights. She even has her own plane, a bright-yellow 1968 Beechcraft Musketeer Super III called Big Bird.

While still on the ground, Ross explains how planes fly to her young visitors and what will happen once they are in the air. As they walk toward the planes, Ross asks, "Can you guess which one Big Bird is?"

Each flight lasts only 15 to 20 minutes but gives Ross enough time to introduce her guests to the experience of being airborne, and she even lets them take the controls for a brief moment. She also patiently answers the inevitable flood of questions, including questions on what is involved in becoming a pilot, air traffic controller or participating in the aviation community in other ways.

Ross is particularly touched by the career- and hobby-related questions, because she remembers all too well how confusing it was to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up. She knew that she loved anything mechanical, including operating—and helping maintain and repair—the tractors, combines, bulldozers and trucks on her parents' farm in western Iowa, but it took a while to figure out the rest. She still even has a carefully folded essay that she had written during her junior year in high school.

"I would like to be some sort of craftsman," Ross wrote at age 16, "a master at my trade. A cabinet maker. A jeweler, not one who just sets stones but one who makes his or her own designs. Or maybe a watch or clock repair person. I would enjoy aircraft maintenance, being an architect, mathematician, chemist, mineralogist, geochemist, geologist, aircraft designer."

In the end Ross studied geology but later transitioned into materials science, and her initial career uncertainties make her all the more determined to help youngsters understand their many options and encourage them to dream big.

An early and not-so-early start in aviation

In September 2013 Ross was staffing an information booth in Albuquerque for the Ninety#Nines, an international organization established in 1929 by 99 licensed women pilots, including Amelia Earhart, when she heard an excited young voice cut through the crowd. "You fly a yellow plane!" a young boy exclaimed as he made his way toward Ross.

The boy had flown with Ross during a Young Eagles event the previous year and had stood out in her mind because he had developed a business plan for a flight base operation at age 10. He also had been on 10 separate Young Eagles flights because that was all his family could afford to support his ambitions. Ross suggested that the boy might take advantage of the Civil Air Patrol's Cadet Program, but at the time he was not quite old enough. Now he finally was 12 and told Ross all about his plans. "We parted with a sense of optimism," Ross says, "and many smiles."

Surprisingly Ross herself had only been in a small plane twice before deciding to learn to fly. The first time Ross' uncle had invited her on a flight in his private plane when Ross was about 14 or 15. As Ross looked out the window that evening, the vastness of the sky and beauty of the fields below cast a spell on her, but the idea of piloting a plane herself did not cross her mind.

Fast-forward several decades to 2009, with a grown-up Ross inside a small aircraft for the second time. A fellow Laboratory employee had offered to show Ross the skies above New Mexico, and this time Ross knew that she wanted to become a pilot before the engine even started.

"The aviation light bulb finally came on for me," Ross recalls. "As I watched my friend go through his preflight safety checks, my heart was in my throat with sheer excitement and the sense that I'd found where I needed to be and what I needed to do."

Ross works for the Materials Science and Technology Division's Nuclear Materials Science group.

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Resources

- [Young Eagles Program](#)
- [The Ninety-Nines](#)
- [Civil Air Patrol's Cadet Program](#)

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